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SOME ABSURDITIES OF THE HOUSE OF COMMONS.

BY T. P. O'CONNOR, M. P.

IN one of Anthony Trollope's novels there is a pathetic picture of a great business man who had risen from poverty to wealth; who had transformed the whole face of his country, and enriched all its present and future generations; and yet who had experienced in all these mighty achievements nothing like the thrill of pleasure with which he heard himself referred to in the House of Commons as the "honorable member" for such and such a place.

This picture carries more to the imagination of one acquainted with the House of Commons than it could even to so keen a student of human nature as Mr. Trollope. And, besides, from Mr. Trollope's lack of personal acquaintance with the House, the picture lacked another, and perhaps an even more pathetic, feature. I have seen scores of these wealthy, self-made men enter the House of Commons, all betraying in their look the same consciousness of a triumphant climax to a prosperous career. The vanity has been too transparent to be anything but amusing; a revelation of that ambition for supremacy in wealth and rise in social position, which lies at the root of much of the life of this country. And you forgive all the exultation of those first hours in the House of Commons when you see this same man within a short time afterwards. It may be a few months; it may be a year; but it always comes. You observe that the face has grown downcast; that he who has been seen, as it were, glued to his seat for months, suddenly begins to be less frequent in attendance; or that, if he be in the House at all, he is to be found wandering about the lobbies and corridors, silent, distraught, with a certain suggestion of not belonging to the place, of finding himself a stranger and a nuisance there.

If you inquire into the cause of this change, so rapid and so complete, the successful business man will unburden his soul to you, and confess that he finds the House of Commons a disappointment. He entered with a high sense of its august glory, and of the tremendous part it has played in the history of the Empire and of the world; and, accordingly, he expected that he would find there the climax and the consummation of all those qualities which have made the commercial greatness of his country. Accustomed to great business transactions, to the promptness, rapidity and energy which are characteristic of English business life, he had expected to find the same methods practiced in the Englishman's chief and highest assembly. He finds nothing of the kind. On the contrary, he learns that the great object of the House of Commons is not how to do business, but how not to do it; that it consists of men who, for the most part, unless for a couple of hours each day, avoid the place as if it were infected with the pestilence; and that, of those who remain in the House and take a part in its proceedings, the majority are wearied, disillusioned men, who have lost nerve and hope and the freshness of their energies.

And coming to this conclusion, and finding that what is wanted of him is not the benefit of his vast experience, not his still huge energy, and not his still characteristic promptitude, but that he is expected to "loaf" about the House until the division is called, he becomes unhappy, and longs for the whirr of the familiar machinery, for the quickness and directness and eager employment of every moment in the old place of business; and, at the height of his glory and of his ambition—as is so often the case with human life—he is really at his most miserable moment.

There are many causes for this transformation of our prosperous and successful millionaire; but the one which, I am certain, accounts for it more than anything else, is the hours of the House of Commons. In these hours, I see the unhappy origin of the enervating and disheartening atmosphere of the place, and of many of the other phenomena which make it one of the most unbusinesslike and ineffective legislative instruments in the world.

Let me try to make those outside the House of Commons realize its methods of work. On four days of the week, it meets

at three o'clock; on one day, Wednesday, it meets at noon. On the four days, it adjourns usually at half-past twelve at night; on Wednesdays, it adjourns at six o'clock. It will at once strike anybody that there is something very foolish in beginning the work of the day at such a late hour as three o'clock. Men of really active minds and temperaments have usually finished their work at that hour. But this is only the beginning of the absurdities of the House of Commons.

The stranger entering the House at three o'clock would see, during the greater part of the session, a sight the meaning of which would be quite obscure to him. The Speaker sits in his chair like a graven image; the benches are practically deserted, as a rule; not a sound disturbs the stillness; you, somehow or other, get the impression of a tomb-like silence and suspension of life. Now and then, it is true, and on some days of the week, you hear a member get up and mumble something to the unlistening and empty benches, and there is another mumble from one of the clerks, and another from the Speaker, and that is all. What this means is that some private business—a small canal bill, or some of the other subjects which, by infinite absurdity, are heaped upon the shoulders of an overworked and overburdened assembly—has been thus decided. But very often there is not even this small modicum of business to be done, and the silence remains unbroken for the half-hour which elapses between the meeting of the House and half-past three; the Speaker remaining like a graven image, and the House deserted and silent.

Thus half an hour of the best time of the House—the time when it is freshest for work—is wasted. At half-past three, questions begin. I regard the power of asking questions as one of the very best features of our Parliamentary system. The questions are often foolish, frequently they are petty; often they touch on subjects which should be given to local assemblies, and rigorously excluded from the House of Commons. But still these questions enable every member, whether articulate or inarticulate, whether wise or unwise, great or small, to bring before the House every possible subject of interest that may be connected with the vast machinery of social life in the Empire; and this period shows the House in its best and most useful aspect—namely, as the Grand Inquest of the Nation.

Apart from this, the question time is the one which members

of Parliament most like. It is the one period of the evening when you may expect interest, excitement, a scene, a portentous, Ministerial announcement. And the consequence is that it is the one period in the evening when you can be certain there will be something like a full attendance in the House. Indeed, I lay stress on this fullness of attendance at this period of the evening to emphasize a point to which I will return shortly.

After question time, if there be a bill of any interest and importance before the House, there come the speeches by the leading men of the House. It is the time which is most favored by the occupants of the front benches. The prospect of these speeches is sufficient to keep the attendance still large. But if it should happen, as very often it does, that the first speakers are men of no particular note, then the House empties after question time. Or if it should happen that the business under discussion is of vast importance, and yet presents no hope of picturesqueness or general interest, the House again empties. For instance, the Navy estimates, the Army estimates, dealing as they do with the defence of the country—one of its supreme interests, and involving expenditure by tens of millions—are always debated in a House that is practically empty. I have seen millions of money voted by a House consisting at most of ten or fifteen members. Indeed, one might almost venture on the paradox, with regard to the House of Commons, that its attendance and its interest are in inverse proportion to the importance of the subjects which it is debating. A small personal squabble between two members will often bring to the House a crowded, excited and interested audience, while the interests of the Empire will leave the House cold and empty.

Indeed, in some respects, the House may be said to be unrepresentative of the mood or interest of the hour among the masses of the nation. A man in the armor of the fifteenth century could not be more unwieldy than the House of Commons is, under the machinery which it has inherited from olden and from very different days. There was a very remarkable illustration of this during the times of depression and anxiety through which the country was passing in the first months of the present war. Outside the House of Commons—nay, in the lobby, which was but a yard from its floor—there was but one subject uppermost in everybody's mind. To attempt to talk of anything but

the war and its fortunes would have been to abuse the patience and even the patriotism of any Englishman. But you passed from the whirring and noisy street, and even from the buzzing lobby, into the House itself, and you would find that body debating an electric or a gas or a railway bill, as though the fortunes of the Empire were of less importance than the price per thousand of the gas consumed by the inhabitants of the southern part of London.

When the main speeches of the evening are delivered, if there be any such speeches, the hour of half-past seven is reached, and then members become restive. If there be any chance of a division, they seek to rush it on by an outburst of turbulence, by trying to shout down every member who attempts to speak. But if that be found impossible, they rush to the lobby, obtain, if they can, a "pair," and then disappear to their homes and their other amusements or occupations. And then begins what is called the "dinner hour."

The public are quite familiar with the term. They can scarcely take up any description of a sitting of the House without finding some phrase to the effect that the speech was listened to by a small audience, as it was the "dinner hour;" or that such and such a member had the misfortune to be driven into the "dinner hour," or so on. But these phrases, suggestive as they are, do not give anything like an adequate idea of what the dinner hour in the House really means. It means that, from half-past seven in the evening till ten or half-past ten, three-fourths—I would not exaggerate if I even said four-fifths—of the members of the House of Commons are absent from the House. The absent members are as far away from the House, indeed, so far as knowing what is going on there is concerned, as if they were suddenly transported to another island. Nor is this all. Of the members who remain, very few are in the House itself. They also, though they cannot go to their homes, or to the theatre, or to the ball, have to dine; and under the overwhelming sense of boredom, and physical and mental depression which their enforced presence in the House involves, they remain as long as they can over the dinner table and in the smoking rooms. The very last thing they would think of is to go back to the House which they have just left and listen to anything that may be going on there. They know that, during that period, it is

only the smaller speakers of the House that will take any part in its proceedings. For their convenience, and to spare them the necessity of going into the House without adequate reason, there is, in several apartments of the House, a board on which the names of the speakers, as they rise, are given; and thus, if there be the sudden and unexpected phenomenon of a speech from one of the more important members, the member dining at leisure, or enjoying his cigar, gets due notice and can rush off to the House.

The Speaker, or the Chairman of Committees, takes a short vacation of half an hour during this period, and for that short interval the House is empty and idle. But for the rest of the time, the House goes on with its business. Men make speeches, Ministers push on supply; divisions are taken, members rushing in from their dinners or their cigars, when the electric bells that ring all over the House give them notice that a division is on; and, in short, everything goes on as if the House were really the House, and not merely a miserable remnant of it.

The newspapers continue, as a rule, to give the world outside a false impression of what the House is really like during this period of the evening. In papers like *The Times*, which still give lengthy reports, columns regularly and duly appear of the speeches that are made; and the public, reading these miles of reports, conjure up before their imaginations an excited and crowded assembly, that sits listening to words which must be wise because they are so fully reported. What occurs, as a matter of fact, is that for some hours every night there are but ten members in the House. Sometimes there are even fewer than the ten. I have seen a member addressing the House when there were but two others in the chamber in addition to himself. I have seen a member address the House when his only audience was the Speaker. Indeed, for some little time before and after the return of the Speaker or the Chairman from his half-hour's recess every night, there are rarely more than half a dozen members in the House.

It is an entire abuse of terms and confusion of ideas to speak of the House of Commons as really sitting and really existing under such circumstances. Of course, Ministers do not urge a reform. The smaller the audience, the more quickly they calculate they will get through their business, and to get through

business quickly becomes in the end the main ambition of most Ministers. For, like all spendthrifts, the House of Commons, which plays fast and loose with its time and resources, is always in arrears. With all the changes that have been made in the rules, there is the old block of business; now, as in the days of John Bright, you might as well try to pass ten busses through Temple Bar, as try to get business transacted with any rapidity in the House of Commons. But to take the trouble of electing those who ought to be the best and wisest men to a deliberative assembly, and then to constitute that assembly so that, during a fourth or a third of its hours, it shall be deprived of the attendance of these picked men, seems about as absurd an arrangement as the folly of man could devise.

I doubt if even Ministers will long continue to tolerate this state of things. It is harder upon them than upon any other body of members. Whatever happens, they have to remain in the House; they are the one section that can never afford to take even a brief holiday; a night out for them is as much a luxury and a rarity as for a domestic servant. There are some thirty-six to forty officials in the House of Commons. Forty members form the quorum, and thus it comes that, as these officials are in the receipt of salaries from the country, and as they just about form a quorum, they are expected to remain in the House throughout the entire evening. It is not that they are required to take part in debate; as a matter of fact, big and full-dress debates, with all the Ministers present, are almost things of the past. More and more every day it is becoming the custom of the House of Commons to leave a bill exclusively in the charge of one Minister. Whenever a Minister, indeed, intervenes during the debate on the bill of which his colleague is in charge, there is evidently the feeling that this Minister is guilty of an intrusion and almost an impertinence. During the nights, for instance, when the Chancellor of the Exchequer was dealing with the Budget in Committee, the Chancellor sat on the treasury bench all alone. Not even the Secretary of the Treasury was there to keep him in countenance, or even to help him with some of the facts of the department to which they both belong. And, similarly, when the Telephone Bill was being carried through the House of Commons, Mr. Hanbury, the Secretary of the Treasury, was left all to himself; the Chancellor of the Exchequer rarely, if ever, put

in an appearance. Solidarity, in the sense of a body of men ready and present to help each other in debate, no longer exists in the House of Commons.

This means that the Ministers who don't happen to be in charge of a bill remain outside the House. For some portion of the evening they imitate the ordinary member by sitting in the dining-room. After that they disappear, Heaven knows where. Up to a few years ago, the House of Commons had not apartments for most of the Ministers, and they either had to go back to their offices to work, or try to work in the library. Of recent years they are more favored. A certain number of apartments have been given over to them; but here again the absurd and unpractical spirit which rules over the House of Commons asserts itself. The Ministers are either in small cellars or small attics; either ten feet above the level of the Thames or in some inaccessible room which can only be reached by climbing long staircases.

And thus it happens that the Ministers have to spend nine hours nearly every night in the stifling and enervating atmosphere of the House of Commons. What does this mean? It means that the best energies and the best hours of the men who rule this Empire are, to a large extent, wasted and frittered away. Ministers are constantly breaking down under the strain, the more exasperating because it is so needless. At the beginning of the present session of Parliament, Mr. Wyndham, who was the second figure in the great department on whose energy, activity and skill the fortunes of the Empire depended, had to spend nine hours in the House every night for weeks. Sometimes he had scarcely the time even to snatch, or rather bolt, a meal. And this man was expected after that to be in Pall Mall in the morning, and to come there with all the freshness of his energies, all the clearness of his mind, all the steadiness of his nerves. He broke down, of course, after a while, and was confined to his house for days. In short, if in this hour of national stock taking, or perhaps I should call it national examination of conscience, Great Britain does not pay heed to the waste of time, of health, of careers, of efficiency which takes place in the House of Commons, it will fail to extirpate one of the causes that are devouring the best energies of the rulers of the Empire.

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